6 Personality, Strategy and Structure: some Consequences of Strong Minds

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My view of business history has a strongly 'political' tinge to it. That is, I think that in looking at the way businesses develop, particularly those run by large corporations, one is looking at power politics in an economic landscape. Businessmen are often driven by motives which are by no means purely commercial. They seek power. They engage in rivalry. Their rivalries may be personal, or corporate, or both. The plans they make, though presented, for orthodoxy's sake, as being aimed purely at the maximisation of profits, often have quite other ends in view as well. It follows that in business history, as in political history, we are concerned with the interplay between men and events, and it is equally important to understand both. Indeed I would go so far as to say that without having a pretty good knowledge of the people you are dealing with, you are unlikely to form a sound judgement of the things that have happened in-or to-their companies and their industries.

This is largely because whenever strategy is being planned, or a decision is being taken, there are usually several options open, and it will depend very much on the personalities involved which one is chosen. A very powerful personality will impose a pattern on events just as surely in business as in politics. Or he will seek to impose one, and fail. Or he will succeed in a totally unexpected way, and everybody will believe him when he says that that was what he meant to do all along. All these things happen in business as they happen in other human activities. If we want to understand how business develops we must pay as much attention to its outstanding personalities as to matters of technology, finance, labour relations, or any of the other possible chapter headings in the book. And certainly personalities come powerfully into play in Professor Chandler's field of strategy and structure, as
he and Professor Salsbury have demonstrated in their biography of Pierre S. du Pont: a major work which deserves to be at least as widely known as Alfred P. Sloan’s autobiography *My Years with General Motors.* Works like these are as important to the historian of business as biographies and memoirs of statesmen are to the political historian, and it is perhaps in this direction, among others, that we should look if we are seeking to widen the field of business history. I propose to discuss three men in detail and two briefly. The three whom I propose to discuss in detail are among the outstanding figures in British business in the last hundred years. One – the first Lord Leverhulme – could sustain a claim to be considered the most remarkable character who has ever played a part in British business, and he would certainly stand out more prominently in our national record if as much attention were paid by historians and biographers to business men as to politicians. What I have to say about Leverhulme is founded on the narrative in Volume I of Professor Wilson’s *History of Unilever.* The conclusions I draw from the narrative, however, are entirely my own responsibility and are not to be attributed to Charles Wilson in any way. My account of the other two is based on my own work on ICI. To avoid a superabundance of footnotes, I have been sparing in my citations from Wilson’s work and my own, but where no attribution is given for statements of fact it can be assumed that the source is either *The History of Unilever* or *Imperial Chemical Industries: a History,* chiefly the second volume, from which are reproduced, by permission, the diagrams illustrating ICI organisation. My three main characters are:

William Hesketh Lever, first Viscount Leverhulme of the Western Isles (1851–1925), founder and first Chairman of Lever Brothers Limited,

Alfred Moritz Mond, first Baron Melchett of Landford (1868–1930), co-founder and first Chairman of ICI,

Harry Duncan McGowan, first Baron McGowan of Ardeer (1874–1961), co-founder and second Chairman of ICI.

As a group for study, they have the advantage that each falls into a clearly defined category familiar to everyone who is concerned with the history of business or with social history. Lever is that central figure of the middle class: the self-made man who goes into business for himself and from small beginnings creates a very large enterprise indeed. Lord Melchett, perhaps better known as Sir Alfred Mond, represents the second generation in business, the founder’s son, who is required simultaneously to advance his father’s work and to make a position for himself. (He was the son of Dr Ludwig Mond FRS (1839–1909), co-